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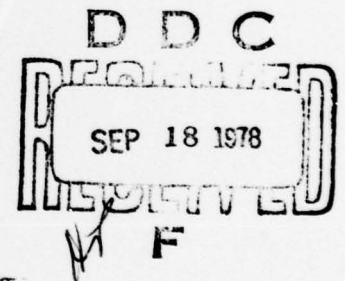
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Explicating the Tacit Knowledge in Teaching and Learning

Allan Collins

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EXPLICATING THE TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Allan Collins

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to show how the emerging field of Cognitive Science can have a major impact on practical education. In particular it provides an overview of two projects at Bolt, Beranek & Newman: the work on Socratic tutoring by Collins and Stevens and the work on diagnosing student's misconceptions in arithmetic by Brown and Burton. These two projects are cited as examples of how the techniques of Cognitive Science make it possible to analyze teaching and learning in genuinely novel ways.

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EXPLICATING THE TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN TEACHING & LEARNING

Allan Collins

The question I decided to address is whether Cognitive Science has anything new to say about education, given that some of the world's best minds have been thinking about education for thousands of years. The answer I think is yes; Cognitive Science provides a set of theoretical formalisms and analysis techniques that can be used to study teaching and learning of topics like math and sciences in a genuinely novel way. My plan is to show how this is possible with two case studies: first I will outline some work Stevens and I (Collins, 1977; Stevens & Collins, 1977; Stevens, Goldin & Collins, in press) have done on tutoring by the Socratic method, and second I will describe work of Brown & Burton (1978) on diagnosing students' procedural errors in arithmetic. These are only examples of the kind of analyses possible.

In our work on Socratic tutoring, we analyzed dialogues by a number of tutors teaching different subjects (medicine, geography, etc.) using the Socratic method. The Socratic method is made up of a variety of individual strategies. These strategies involve entrapping the student into mistakes of different kinds, confronting him with counterexamples, forcing him to make predictions, etc. Generally the method requires the student to derive general principles from specific cases, and learn to use these principles to make predictions about new cases.

Using the production rule formalism developed by Newell & Simon (1972), it was possible to characterize the different strategies tutors use in terms of rules of the form "when in situation X, do Y." We can give a few examples to show what these rules look like:

Rule 1: Form a general rule for an insufficient factor.

If

(1) the student gives as an explanation one or more factors that are not sufficient,

then

(2) formulate a general rule asserting that the factor given is sufficient and ask the student if the rule is true.

Example: If the student gives water as the reason they grow rice in China, ask him "Do you think any place with enough water can grow rice?"

Rule 2: Pick a counterexample for an insufficient factor.

If

(1) the student gives as an explanation one or more factors that are not sufficient, or

(2) agrees to the general rule in Rule 1,

then

(3) pick a counterexample that has the right value of the factor(s) given, but the wrong value of the dependent variable, and

(4) ask what the value of the dependent variable is for that case, or (5) ask why the casual dependence does not hold for that case.

Example: If a student gives water as the reason they grow rice in China or agrees that any place with enough water can grow rice, pick a place like Ireland where there is enough water and ask, "Do they grow rice in Ireland?" or "Why don't they grow rice in Ireland?"

Rule 3: Question a prediction made without enough information.

If

- (1) a student makes a prediction as to the value of the dependent variable on the basis of some set of factors, and
- (2) there is another value consistent with that set of factors, then
- (3) ask the student why not the other value.

Example: If the student predicts they grow wheat in Nigeria because it is fertile and warm, ask him why not rice.

While in one sense the Socratic method is a single approach that involves teaching the student to reason from cases, in another sense it is made up of a variety of these specific strategies that good teachers hit upon in the course of their teaching. Some hit upon one set, some upon another, though there is usually some overlap. There is little need for teachers to verbalize these strategies, since their application only depends on an intuitive feel as to how to use them. If they are taught, they are usually taught by example. So there is no very specific body of knowledge about the Socratic method, and hence there is no theory to be extended and refined. In fact until computers provided us with formalisms for expressing "process models,"

it is unlikely that anyone would have thought of constructing a specific theory about such a thing as the Socratic method.

By making the tacit knowledge about Socratic teaching explicit, it becomes possible to educate teachers about the Socratic method. We can teach them the strategies that many different teachers have developed and the situations where they apply. If they were to evolve the method on their own or from watching other good teachers, they would at best develop only a subset of these strategies.

More generally the method of analysis can be applied to analyze the specific strategies used by the most effective teachers in the country. Such an analysis can be derived from videotapes of actual classes. The analysis would determine the teacher's systematic patterns of response to particular teaching situations. It is a kind of formal analysis that simply was not possible in terms of earlier formalisms in psychology, such as S-R bonds or stage models. Simply put we can now construct a formal theory of the strategies used by our most successful teachers, and we can thereby make their accumulated tacit knowledge available to every potential teacher.

My second example concerns modelling the learner to diagnose his misunderstandings. In a system called BUGGY, Brown & Burton (1978) developed a representation called a procedural network in which they represent all the procedures necessary to carryout addition and subtraction in explicit detail. In BUGGY, procedural errors are represented as perturbations of the correct procedures. In this way the program can simulate any

consistent procedure that students follow even if it is a wrong procedure, as in the example below.

Consider five "snap shots" of a student's performance doing addition as might be seen on a homework assignment. Before proceeding, discover the student's bug.

Sample of the student's work:

41	328	989	66	216
+9	+917	+52	+887	+13
<u>50</u>	<u>1345</u>	<u>1141</u>	<u>1053</u>	<u>229</u>

Once you have discovered the bug, try testing your hypothesis by "simulating" the buggy student so as to predict his results on the following two test problems.

446	201
<u>+815</u>	<u>+399</u>

The bug is really quite simple. In computer terms, the student, after determining the carry, forgets to reset the "carry register" to zero and hence the amount carried is accumulated across the columns. For example, in the student's second problem, (e.g., $328 + 917$ equals 1345) he proceeds as follows: $8+7 = 15$ so he writes 5 and carries 1, $2+1 = 3$ plus the one carry is 4, lastly $3+9 = 12$ but that one carry from the first column is still there -- it hasn't been reset -- so adding it in to this column gives 13. If this is the bug, then the answers to the test problems will be 1361 and 700. This bug is not so absurd when one considers that a child might use his fingers to remember the carry and forget to bend back his fingers, or counters, after each carry is added.

It turns out that it is very difficult for experts to diagnose systematic errors that BUGGY makes, especially when the errors are in low level procedures that are called by different high level procedures, or when there is more than one bug in different procedures. To a teacher the students errors are likely to look random.

One way the BUGGY program can be used is to train teachers and students how to diagnose bugs. The program selects a bug, and gives a few examples of the bug as manifested in working problems. The user then selects problems for BUGGY to work until he thinks he has figured out the bug. Then BUGGY presents him with five test cases where he must simulate the bug. If the user cannot produce the same answer as BUGGY on any of the test cases he then goes back to trying to diagnose the bug. In this way teachers can be taught how to be expert diagnosticians.

More importantly Brown & Burton have used BUGGY to analyze automatically a subtraction test taken by 1300 students in the 4th to 6th grades. They found that about 40% of the students used essentially correct procedures, about 20% have what appear to be random errors to BUGGY, and about 40% have systematic procedural errors. From their data they have compiled a list of the 20 most frequent errors in subtraction and their frequencies among grade school students. The three most common bugs are the following:

1. Borrow from zero (e.g., $103-45 = 158$) Frequency 107/1300
When borrowing from a column whose top digit is 0, the student writes 9, but does not continue borrowing from the column to the left of the 0.

2. Smaller from larger (e.g., $253-118 = 145$) Frequency = $54/1300$

The student subtracts the smaller digit in a column from the larger digit regardless of which one is on top.

3. Difference of $0-N = N$ and jump over zero in borrowing (e.g., $204-25 = 129$) Frequency= $34/1300$

When ever the top digit in a column is 0, the student writes the bottom digit in the answer; i.e., $0-N = N$. When the student needs to borrow from a column whose top digit is 0, he skips that column and borrows from the next one.

The implications of BUGGY for testing are profound. No longer need a test be a means to assign a score to a student. A score is an arbitrary measure that tells very little about how well the student is doing or what his real problem is. For example, a single bug in a low level procedure will produce many more wrong answers than several bugs in higher level procedures. What a test becomes, if BUGGY is taken seriously, is a method for diagnosing the students underlying errors. The outcome is a statement of whatever specific procedural errors the student is making. Then teaching can be directed explicitly at the bugs the test has diagnosed.

Surely before BUGGY arithmetic had been studied very thoroughly. But by applying a Cognitive Science analysis, Brown & Burton could find new insights into the problems children are having. Other basic skills (higher mathematics, reading, writing, etc.) are more difficult to analyze in this way, but the lesson should be obvious. There is enormous leverage in this kind of analysis and the potential implications for practical education are profound.

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Dr. Marshall J. Farr, Director
Personnel & Training Research Programs
Office of Navy Research (Code 458)
Arlington, VA 22217

ONR Branch Office
495 Summer Street
Boston, MA 02210
Attn: Dr. James Lester

ONR Branch Office
1030 East Green Street
Pasadena, CA 91101
Attn: Dr. Eugene Gloye

ONR Branch Office
536 S. Clark Street
Chicago, IL 60605
Attn: Dr. Charles E. Davis

Dr. M.A. Bertin, Scientific Director
Office of Naval Research
Scientific Liaison Group/Tokyo
American Embassy
APO San Francisco, CA 96503

Office of Naval Research
Code 200
Arlington, VA 22217

Commanding Officer
Naval Research Laboratory
Code 2627
Washington, DC 20190

Director, Human Resource Management
Naval Amphibious School
Naval Amphibious Base, Little Creek
Norfolk, VA 23521

LCDR Charles J. Theisen, Jr., MSC, USN
4024
Naval Air Development Center
Warminster, PA 18974

Commanding Officer
U.S. Naval Amphibious School
Coronado, CA 92155

Commanding Officer
Naval Health Research Center
San Diego, CA 92152
Attn: Library

Chairman, Leadership & Law Dept.
Div. of Professional Development
U.S. Naval Academy
Annapolis, MD 21402

Scientific Advisor to the Chief
of Naval Personnel (Pers Or)
Naval Bureau of Personnel
Room 4410, Arlington Annex
Washington, DC 20370

Dr. Jack R. Borsting
Provost & Academic Dean
U.S. Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA 93940

Mr. Maurice Callahan
NODAC (Code 2)
Dept. of the Navy
Bldg. 2, Washington Navy Yard
(Anacostia)
Washington, DC 20374

Office of Civilian Personnel
Code 342/02 WAP
Washington, DC 20390
Attn: Dr. Richard J. Niehaus

Office of Civilian Personnel
Code 263
Washington, DC 20390

Superintendent (Code 1424)
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA 93940

Mr. George N. Graine
Naval Sea Systems Command
SEA 047C12
Washington, DC 20362

Chief of Naval Technical Training
Naval Air Station Memphis (75)
Millington, TN 38054
Attn: Dr. Norman J. Kerr

Principal Civilian Advisor
for Education and Training
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Pensacola, FL 32508
Attn: Dr. William L. Maloy

Dr. Alfred F. Smode, Director
Training Analysis & Evaluation Group
Department of the Navy
Orlando, FL 32813

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Training Support (01A)
Pensacola, FL 32509

Capt. H.J. Connery, USN
Navy Medical R&D Command
NNMC, Bethesda, MD 20014

Navy Personnel R&D Center
Code 01
San Diego, CA 92152

Navy Personnel R&D Center
Code 306
San Diego, CA 92152
Attn: Dr. James McGrath

A.A. Sjöholm, Head, Technical Support
Navy Personnel R&D Center
Code 201
San Diego, CA 92152

Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152
Attn: Library

Dr. J.D. Fletcher
Advanced Research Projects Agency
Cybernetics Technology Office
1400 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22209

Capt. D.M. Gragg, MC, USN
Head, Section on Medical Education
Uniformed Services Univ. of
the Health Sciences
6917 Arlington Road
Bethesda, MD 20014

Officer-in-Charge
Navy Occupational Development &
Analysis Center (NODAC)
Building 150, Washington Navy Yard
(Anacostia)
Washington, DC 20374

LCDR J.W. Snyder, Jr.
F-14 Training Model Manager
VF-124
San Diego, CA 92025

Dr. John Ford
Navy Personnel R&D Center
San Diego, CA 92152

Dr. Worth Scanland
Chief of Naval Education & Training
NAS, Pensacola, FL 32508

Technical Director
U.S. Army Research Institute for the
Behavioral & Social Sciences
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Armed Forces Staff College
Norfolk, VA 23511
Attn: Library

Commandant
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Fort Benning, GA 31905
Attn: ATSH-I-V-IT

Commandant
U.S. Army Institute of Administration
Fort Benjamin Harrison, IN 46216
Attn: EA

Dr. Beatrice Farr
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. Frank J. Harris
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. Ralph Dusek
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. Leon Nawrocki
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. Joseph Ward
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. Milton S. Katz, Chief
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U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Col. G.B. Howard
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Training Support Activity
Fort Eustis, VA 23604

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Training Management Institute
U.S. Army, Bldg. 1725
Fort Eustis, VA 23604

HQ USAREUE & 7th Army
ODCSOPS
USAREUR Director of GED
APO New York 09403

ARI Field Unit - Leavenworth
P.O. Box 3122
Ft. Leavenworth, KS 66027

DCDR, USAADMINCEN
Bldg. #1, A310
Ft. Benjamin Harrison, IN 46216
Attn: AT21-OED Library

Dr. Edgar Johnson
U.S. Army Research Institute
1300 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209

Dr. James Baker
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Research Branch
AFMPC/DPMYP
Randolph AFB, TX 78148

AFHRL/AS (Dr. G.A. Eckstrand)
Wright-Patterson AFB
Ohio 45433

Dr. Ross L. Morgan (AFHRL/ASR)
Wright-Patterson AFB
Ohio 45433

Dr. Marty Rockway (AFHRL/TT)
Lowry AFB
Colorado 80230

Instructional Technology Branch
AFHRL
Lowry AFB, CO 80230

Dr. Alfred R. Fregly
AFOSR/NL, Building 410
Bolling AFB, DC 20332

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ATC/XPTD
Randolph AFB, TX 78148

Dr. Wilson A. Judd
McDonnell-Douglas Astronautics Co. East
Lowry AFB
Denver, CO 80230

Dr. William Strobie
McDonnell Douglas Astronautics Co. East
Lowry AFB
Denver, CO 80230

Director, Office of Manpower
Utilization
HQ, Marine Corps (Code MPU)
BCB, Building 2009
Quantico, VA 22134

Dr. A.L. Slafkosky
Scientific Advisor (Code RD-1)
HQ, U.S. Marine Corps
Washington, DC 20380

AC/S, Education Programs
Education Center, MCDEC
Quantico, VA 22134

Mr. Joseph J. Cowan, Chief
Psychological Research Branch (G-P-1/62)
U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters
Washington, DC 20590

Advanced Research Projects Agency
Administrative Services
1400 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209
Attn: Ardella Holloway

Dr. Harold F. O'Neil, Jr.
U.S. Army Research Institute
5001 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. Stephen Andriole
Advanced Research Projects Agency
1400 Wilson Blvd.
Arlington, VA 22209

Defense Documentation Center
Cameron Station, Bldg. 5
Alexandria, VA 22314

Military Assistant for Human Resources
Office of the Director of Defense
Research & Engineering
Room 3D129, The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Director, Management Information
Systems Office
OSD, M&RA
Room 3B917, The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dr. Vern Urry
Personnel R&D Center
U.S. Civil Service Commission
1900 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20415

Dr. Andrew R. Molnar
Science Education Dev. & Res.
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550

Dr. Marshall S. Smith
Associate Director
NIE/OPEPA
National Institute of Education
Washington, DC 20208

Dr. Joseph L. Young, Director
Memory & Cognitive Processes
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550

Dr. H. Wallace Sinaiko, Director
Manpower Research & Advisory Services
Smithsonian Institution
801 N. Pitt Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dr. James M. Ferstl
Employee Development: Training
Technologist
Bureau of Training
U.S. Civil Service Commission
Washington, DC 20415

Dr. Ronald P. Carver
School of Education
University of Missouri-Kansas City
5100 Rockhill Road
Kansas City, MO 64110

William J. McLaurin
Room 301
Internal Revenue Service
2221 Jefferson Davis Hwy.
Arlington, VA 22202

Dr. John R. Anderson
Dept. of Psychology
Yale University
New Haven, CT 06520

Dr. Scarvia B. Anderson
Educational Testing Service
Suite 1040
3445 Peachtree Road NE
Atlanta, GA 30326

Professor Earl A. Alluisi
Code 287
Dept. of Psychology
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA 23508

Dr. Daniel Alpert
Computer-Based Education
Research Laboratory
University of Illinois
Urbana, IL 61801

Ms. Carole A. Bagley
Applications Analyst
Minnesota Educational
Computing Consortium
1925 Sather Ave.
Lauderdale, MN 55113

Dr. John Brackett
SoftTech
460 Totten Pond Road
Waltham, MA 02154

Dr. Robert K. Branson
1A Tully Bldg.
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL 32306

Dr. John Seely Brown
Bolt Beranek and Newman Inc.
50 Moulton Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Dr. Victor Bunderson
Institute for Computer Uses in Education
355 EDLC
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT 84601

Jacklyn Caselli
ERIC Clearinghouse on Information
Resources
Stanford University
School of Education - SCRDT
Stanford, CA 94305

Century Research Corporation
4113 Lee Highway
Arlington, VA 22207

Dr. A. Charnes
BEB 203E
University of Texas
Austin, TX 78712

Dr. Kenneth E. Clark
College of Arts & Sciences
University of Rochester
River Campus Station
Rochester, NY 14627

Dr. John J. Collins
Essex Corporation
6305 Caminito Estrellado
San Diego, CA 92120

Dr. Ruth Day
Dept. of Psychology
Yale University
2 Hillhouse Avenue
New Haven, CT 06520

ERIC Facility-Acquisitions
4833 Rugby Avenue
Bethesda, MD 20014

Dr. John Eschenbrenner
McDonnell Douglas Astronautics
Company-East
P.O. Box 30204
St. Louis, MO 80230

Major I.N. Evonic
Canadian Forces Personnel
Applied Research Unit
1107 Avenue Road
Toronto, Ontario, CANADA

Dr. Victor Fields
Dept. of Psychology
Montgomery College
Rockville, MD 20850

Dr. Edwin A. Fleishman
Advanced Research Resources Organization
8555 Sixteenth Street
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dr. Larry Francis
University of Illinois
Computer-Based Educational Research Lab
Champaign, IL 61801

Dr. Frederick C. Frick
MIT Lincoln Laboratory
Room D 268
P.O. Box 73
Lexington, MA 02173

Dr. John R. Frederiksen
Bolt Beranek and Newman Inc.
50 Moulton Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Dr. Vernon S. Gerlach
College of Education
146 Payne Bldg. B
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85281

Dr. Robert Glaser, Co-Director
University of Pittsburgh
3939 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Dr. M.D. Havron
Human Sciences Research, Inc.
7710 Old Spring House Road
West Gate Industrial Park
McLean, VA 22101

Dr. Duncan Hansen
School of Education
Memphis State University
Memphis, TN 38118

Human Resources Research Organization
400 Plaza Bldg.
Pace Blvd. at Fairfield Drive
Pensacola, FL 32505

HumRRO/Western Division
27857 Berwick Drive
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P.O. Box 293
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HumRRO/Western Division
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Carmel, CA 93921
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Dr. Lawrence B. Johnson
Lawrence Johnson & Associates, Inc.
Suite 502
2001 S Street NW
Washington, DC 20009

Dr. Arnold F. Kanarick
Honeywell, Inc.
2600 Ridgeway Pkwy.
Minneapolis, MN 55413

Dr. Roger A. Kaufman
203 Dodd Hall
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL 32306

Dr. Steven W. Keele
Dept. of Psychology
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
Dr. David Klahr
Dept. of Psychology
Carnegie-Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Mr. W.E. Lassiter
Data Solutions Corp.
Suite 211, 6849 Old Dominion Drive
McLean, VA 22101

Dr. Robert R. Mackie
Human Factors Research, Inc.
6780 Corton Drive
Santa Barbara Research Park
Goleta, CA 93017

Dr. William C. Mann
University of So. California
Information Sciences Institute
4676 Admiralty Way
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Dr. Eric McWilliams
Program Manager
Technology and Systems, TIE
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550

Dr. Leo Munday
Houghton Mifflin Co.
p.O. Box 1970
Iowa City, IA 52240

Dr. Donald A. Norman
Dept. of Psychology C-009
University of California, San Diego
La Jolla, CA 92093

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N. Stonington, CT 06359

Dr. Kenneth A. Polycyn
PCR Information Science Co.
Communication Satellite Applications
7600 Old Springhouse Rd.
McLean, VA 22101

Dr. Steven M. Pine
N 660 Elliott Hall
University of Minnesota
75 East River Road
Minneapolis, MN 55455

R. Dir. M. Rauch
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Postfach 161
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Dr. Joseph W. Rigney
University of So. California
Behavioral Technology Laboratories
3717 South Grand
Los Angeles, CA 90007

Dr. Andrew M. Rose
American Institutes for Research
1055 Thomas Jefferson St. NW
Washington, DC 20007

Dr. Leonard L. Rosenbaum, Chairman
Dept. of Psychology
Montgomery College
Rockville, MD 20850

Dr. Mark D. Reckase
Educational Psychology Dept.
University of Missouri-Columbia
12 Hill Hall
Columbia, MO 65201

Dr. Robert J. Seidel
Instructional Technology Group,
HumRRO
300 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dr. Persis Sturgis
Dept. of Psychology
California State University-Chico
Chico, CA 95926

Mr. Dennis J. Sullivan
c/o Canyon Research Group, Inc.
32107 Lindero Canyon Road
Westlake Village, CA 91360

Mr. Walt W. Tornow
Control Data Corporation
Corporate Personnel Research
p.O. Box 0 - HQN060
Minneapolis, MN 55440

Dr. Benton J. Underwood
Dept. of Psychology
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60201

Dr. Carl R. Vest
Battelle Memorial Institute
Washington Operations
2030 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20036

Dr. David J. Weiss
Dept. of Psychology
N660 Elliott Hall
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Dr. Keith Wescourt
Dept. of Psychology
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305

Dr. Claire E. Weinstein
Educational Psychology Dept.
University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX 78712

Dr. Anita West
Denver Research Institute
University of Denver
Denver, CO 80201

Mr. Thomas C. O'Sullivan
TRAC
1220 Sunset Plaza Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90069

Dr. Richard Snow
Stanford University
School of Education
Stanford, CA 94305

Dr. Thomas G. Sticht
Assoc. Director, Basic Skills
National Institute of Education
1200 19th Street NW
Washington, DC 20208

Prof. Fumiko Samejima
Dept. of Psychology
Austin Peay Hall 304C
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN 37916

Liam Bannon
Dept. of Psychology
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario,
CANADA

Mr. Daniel Bobrow
Xerox Parc
3333 Coyote Hill Rd.
Palo Alto, CA 94306

Joost Breuken
Universiteit van Amsterdam
COWO
Spui21
AMSTERDAM

Robert Davis
University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign, ILL 61801

Dr. Dorothy Deringer
National Science Foundation
Division of Science Education
Development & Research
Washington, DC

John Gaschnig
Carnegie-Mellon University
Dept. of Computer Science
Schenley Park
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Ira Goldstein
The Artificial Intelligence Laboratory
545 Technology Square
Cambridge, MA 02139

Jim Greeno
University of Pittsburgh
Learning Research & Development Center
Pittsburgh, PA